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2017 Interim Report NEASC Decision Letter

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December 7, 2017

Dr. Frederick W. Clark, Jr.
President
Bridgewater State University
131 Summer Street, Boyden Hall
Bridgewater, MA 02325-0001

Dear President Clark:

I am pleased to inform you that at its meeting on September 28, 2017, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education considered the reports submitted by Bridgewater State University, as well as the report of the evaluator, and voted to take the following action:

that the interim (fifth-year) report submitted by Bridgewater State University be accepted;

that the information regarding the University's off-campus instructional locations in Yarmouth, MA and Attleboro, MA be accepted, and inclusion of the locations within the institution's accreditation be confirmed;

that the University's general approval to establish off-campus locations in the United States within the scope of its mission be confirmed;

that the comprehensive evaluation scheduled for Fall 2022 be confirmed;

that, in addition to the information included in all self-studies, the self-study prepared in advance of the Fall 2022 evaluation give emphasis to the institution's success in:

1. implementing its strategic plan with emphasis on ensuring that the University's revised mission statement and changes to programs, policies, and processes are in alignment;
2. implementing and assessing the effectiveness of student advising initiatives;
3. revising and evaluating the effectiveness of its Core curriculum with emphasis on student learning outcomes;

4. implementing its internal governance structures;
5. achieving enrollment goals and ensuring that financial resources and student services are sufficient to support the programs offered at the Yarmouth, MA and Attleboro, MA instructional locations;
6. continuing to implement the STEM Graduate Certificate program with emphasis on achieving enrollment goals, evaluating student learning outcomes, and ensuring sufficient faculty oversight of the program.

The Commission gives the following reasons for its action.

The interim report submitted by Bridgewater State University was accepted because it responded to the concerns raised by the Commission in its letters of June 28, 2013, and January 21, 2016 and addressed each of the nine standards, including a reflective essay for Standard 8: *Educational Effectiveness* on student learning and success.

The Commission commends Bridgewater State University (BSU) for submitting a comprehensive and well-conceived interim report that highlights the University's achievements over the last five years. For example, BSU has implemented its Data Stream Project and the University's data are now housed in a single platform; the Office of Assessment has "grown in number and reach of programming;" an Enrollment and Retention Task Force co-led by the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs and the Vice President for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management has been established; improvements have been made to faculty hiring practices; and the University has increased its full-time faculty from 316 to 362, a 13% increase since 2012. We also understand from the report that BSU is actively engaged in its 2017-2027 strategic planning process, and the new plan will include a revised mission statement and "extensive metrics" to evaluate progress on reaching the institutional goals set in the plan. We further note positively that BSU has made significant strides in enhancing technology to improve support provided to faculty and students. For example, DegreeWorks Audit, Transfer Equivalency Self Service, and Recruiter systems have been implemented; also noteworthy are the BSU mobile app that includes "a plethora of features/functionality," the dedication of the IT Teaching and Technology Center to support faculty use of technology, and the implementation of Wireless Everywhere Print Anywhere (WePa) printing kiosks in residence halls. The investment of \$98.7 million in the Mohler-Faria Science and Mathematics Center - the largest capital project undertaken by an institution in the state university system - is impressive, and we note with approval that the University's financial position "remains strong" with assets of \$220.7 million in FY2016, up from \$194.5 million the previous year. Finally, we appreciate learning that in June 2015, BSU hired a founding dean and elevated the Office of Continuing and Distance Education to the College of Continuing Studies. According to the Data First Forms included in the report, completion rates for students enrolled in online courses average 86%, and enrollment in the M.Ed. in Educational Leadership, the University's only degree program offered fully online, stood at 63 students in AY2015, decreasing to 39 students in AY2017. In addition, BSU reported enrollment of 134 students distributed among ten off-campus locations in Massachusetts in AY2017, and no enrollments in programs offered at the two Ecuador sites.

We further commend Bridgewater State University for its thoughtful and informative reflective essay that documents the University's progress in establishing a consistent system of assessment, increasing both the transparency of student learning outcomes and faculty involvement in assessment. Particularly notable is the University's progress in the assessment of Core skills. For example, holistic rubrics are used to assess a collection of students' papers drawn from designated writing assignments in upper-level major courses, and the assessment results provide a "rich dataset" to support continuous improvement efforts on campus. BSU uses a wide variety of direct (e.g., capstone courses and licensure examination passage rates) and indirect (e.g.,

surveys) assessment methods, and we note with favor that BSU periodically evaluates the effectiveness of its assessment strategies and uses assessment results for improvement as demonstrated by the 2015 study of the Core skills rubrics that resulted in a revision to make them more "disciplinarily inclusive," and the establishment of a tutoring program based on assessment results indicating the need for focused student assistance. The report further details institutional assessment initiatives, including the use of high-impact practices (e.g., internship field work, honors program, first-year seminar, global learning), the Quality Project, and the Transparency Project, as well as strategies to improve faculty involvement to "build and strengthen a culture of assessment." According to the report, approximately 80% of first-time, full-time undergraduate students are retained from their first to second year of study and, based on the University's "first-ever" analysis at the graduate level, retention rates across graduate programs average 79-81%. Undergraduate graduation rates have increased by approximately four percentage points over the past five years, with a four-year rate of 32% and a six-year rate of 59% for the 20 IO cohort; graduation rates at the graduate level have remained generally constant, averaging 63%. Course completion rates for students enrolled at off-campus locations AY2016 through AY2018 have remained constant at 95%. While we are heartened to learn that the University is "heavily invested in ensuring educational effectiveness in all academic programming, for all populations, in all instructional locations, at every level of instruction," we also appreciate BSU's candid acknowledgment that "there is a need for more connected evidence from year-to-year."

The Commission accepted the information regarding the University's off-campus instructional locations in Yarmouth, MA and Attleboro, MA and confirmed inclusion of the two locations within the institution's accreditation as well as the University's general approval for off-campus locations because the information provided evidence that BSU implements its off-campus programming in manner consistent with the *Standards for Accreditation* and relevant Commission policies.

The Commission appreciates the information Bridgewater State University provided related to the implementation of programming at its Cape Cod site in Yarmouth, MA and its Attleboro High School site in Attleboro, MA. The evaluator confirmed that the courses offered at each location support the University's mission, and oversight of the locations is integrated into the institution's organizational structure. We note with favor that two full-time staff members - a director and an office manager - are assigned to support the Cape Cod site and, while there are no full-time staff assigned to support the Attleboro location, the staff of the College of Graduate Studies on the main campus are responsible for attending to the needs of Attleboro students. The evaluator further verified that the full-time and part-time faculty members assigned to teach at the off-campus locations hold the appropriate credentials and are sufficient in number. We also note positively that two faculty members are contracted each semester to advise students at the Cape Cod location, and faculty members at the Attleboro location are available to advise students after class. The same academic and student support services offered on BSU's main campus are available to students at the off-campus locations, and student learning outcomes are evaluated with the same methods used to assess student success in all the University's programs.

The scheduling of a comprehensive evaluation in Fall 2022 is consistent with Commission policy requiring each accredited institution to undergo a comprehensive evaluation at least once every ten years. The items the Commission asks to be given special emphasis within the self-study prepared for the comprehensive evaluation are matters related to our standards on *Planning and Evaluation; Mission and Purposes; Students; Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship; The Academic Program; Educational Effectiveness; Organization and Governance; and Institutional Resources*.

As noted positively above, the Commission is gratified to learn that Bridgewater State University is actively engaged in a comprehensive and participatory process to develop its 2017-2027 strategic plan and will, at the time of the next comprehensive evaluation, be about half-way

through the period of implementation. Therefore, we ask that the self-study prepared for the Fall 2022 evaluation provide an update on the institution's success in implementing its strategic plan with emphasis on ensuring that the University's revised mission statement and changes to programs, policies, and processes are in alignment, as evidence that the University "has a demonstrable record of success in implementing the results of its planning" (2.5). We are further guided here by our standards on *Planning and Evaluation* and *Mission and Purposes*:

The institution plans beyond a short-term horizon, including strategic planning that involves realistic analyses of internal and external opportunities and constraints. The results of strategic planning are implemented in all units of the institution through financial, academic, enrollment, and other supporting plans (2.3).

The mission and purposes of the institution are accepted and widely understood by its governing board, administration, faculty, staff, and students. They provide direction to the curricula and other activities and form the basis on which expectations for student learning are developed. Specific objectives, reflective of the institution's overall mission and purposes, are developed by the institution's individual units (1.4).

We understand that the effectiveness of student advising is evaluated, in part, through students' evaluation of teaching, and we appreciate the University's candid assessment that "some academic departments do better than others" in using student feedback to make improvements. We therefore commend BSU on the steps it is taking to increase the effectiveness of its student advising processes, including: hiring additional faculty with an "intentional focus on the quality of curricular delivery and student advising;" increasing Academic Achievement Center staffing to ensure support of the advising needs of first-year students and the centers housed therein; and enhancing student advising practices as an institutional priority in the strategic plan. In keeping with our standards on *Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship* and *Students*, we look forward, in the Fall 2022 self-study, to learning of the institution's success in implementing and assessing the effectiveness of its advising initiatives:

The institution provides advising and academic support services appropriate to the student body. The institution's faculty and professional staff collectively have sufficient interaction with students outside of class to promote students' academic achievement and provide academic and career guidance (5.10).

When instruction, advising, and support for students are carried out by a variety of faculty and academic and other professionals, the institution ensures that personnel in each category have the academic and professional qualifications appropriate to their roles (6.13).

The institution periodically evaluates the sufficiency of and support for academic staff and their effectiveness in teaching and advising, scholarship, service, and as appropriate to institutional mission, research and creative activity. The results of these evaluations are used to enhance fulfillment of the institution's mission (6.14).

According to the interim report, BSU is revising its Core curriculum to "give more emphasis to both the rigor and reinforcement of all the Core skills across the curriculum and in the major." We further note that, while the revision process and approach to assessment will be informed by the development of learning outcomes and revised rubrics, academic departments are still in discussion about how Core skills will be introduced, reinforced, and measured in the major. The Fall 2022 self-study will afford BSU an opportunity to apprise the Commission of the institution's success in revising and evaluating the effectiveness of its Core curriculum with emphasis on student learning outcomes, as informed by our standards on *The Academic Program* and *Educational Effectiveness*:

Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English; the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, for critical analysis and logical thinking; and the capability for continuing learning, including the skills of information literacy. They also demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind (4.15).

The general education requirement is coherent and substantive. It embodies the institution's definition of an educated person and prepares students for the world in which they will live. The requirement informs the design of all general education courses, and provides criteria for its evaluation, including the assessment of what students learn (4.16).

Assessment of learning is based on verifiable statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The process of understanding what and how students are learning focuses on the course, competency, program, and institutional level. Assessment has the support of the institution's academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty and appropriate staff (8.3).

Since the inauguration of a new president in 2015, the University has increased efficiencies by "flattening" its organizational structure; two new divisions were added - Student Success and Diversity and Marketing and Communications; and The Division of Academic Affairs has been restructured to better align expertise with the work of the academic administration. We are particularly gratified to learn that a "primary focus" of the new administration is to ensure that the "decision-making process is transparent and that institutional policies are clear and documented." To demonstrate that "[t]he effectiveness of the institution's organizational structure and system of governance is improved through periodic and systematic review" (3.19), we look forward, through the self-study submitted in advance of the Fall 2022 evaluation, to receiving an update on the institution's success in this area.

As noted in the report of the evaluator, enrollments at the Cape Cod and Attleboro instructional locations have been "steady but small." Cape Cod enrollments have increased from 40 students in Fall 2015 to 65 students in Spring 2017, and BSU enrolled 20 students in the M.Ed. in Educational Leadership program in Attleboro in January 2017. Although direct expenses have outpaced revenues at the Cape Cod location, the University anticipates that this location will become "revenue neutral" over the next few years; to date, tuition earned at the Attleboro location has covered expenses. The visiting evaluator also confirmed that, while students at both locations have access to services online through the University, and the staff at BSU Cape Cod provide face-to-face support, some students expressed concern that their online and on-site support services are not "on par" with those offered to students on the main campus. The Fall 2022 self-study will provide BSU an opportunity to include an update on the institution's success in implementing the Yarmouth and Attleboro instructional sites with emphasis on achieving enrollment goals and ensuring that financial resources and student services are sufficient to support the programs offered at these locations. Our standards on *Students; Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship* (cited above); and *Institutional Resources* are relevant here:

[t]he institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll students who are broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve (*Students*, Statement of the Standard).

The institution's multi-year financial planning is realistic and reflects the capacity of the institution to depend on identified sources of revenue and ensure the advancement of educational quality and services for students (7.6).

The institution offers an array of student services, including physical and mental health services, appropriate to its mission and the needs and goals of its students. It recognizes the variations in services that are appropriate for residential students, at the main campus, at off-campus locations, and for distance education programs as well as the differences in circumstances and goals of students pursuing degrees (5.9).

As the Commission is aware, the STEM Graduate Certificate offered through a contractual arrangement with the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) was implemented in Fall 2016. Thirty students have begun the process of applying for graduate credit and/or the graduate certificate, and 15 students have taken at least one course and have been awarded graduate credit. The report further indicates that courses offered in the AMNH program are "semester-equivalent experiences" for current and future educators, "co-instructed by a scientist and an educator." However, details regarding enrollment goals, the involvement of BSU faculty in the delivery of the program, and the assessment of student achievement in STEM Graduate Certificate courses were not specified. We therefore ask that the Fall 2022 self-study provide an update on the institution's success in continuing to implement the STEM Graduate Certificate program with emphasis on achieving the program's enrollment goals, evaluating student learning outcomes, and ensuring sufficient faculty oversight of the program as evidence that "the institution sets and achieves realistic goals to enroll students who are broadly representative of the population the institution wishes to serve" (*Students*, Statement of the Standard). Our standards on *The Academic Program* and *Educational Effectiveness* (cited above) provide additional guidance here:

Through its system of academic administration and faculty participation, the institution demonstrates an effective system of academic oversight, assuring the quality of the academic program wherever and however it is offered (4.5).

The institution demonstrates its clear and ongoing authority and administrative oversight for the academic elements of all courses for which it awards institutional credit or credentials. These responsibilities include course content, the specification of required competencies and the delivery of the instructional program; selection, approval, professional development, and evaluation of faculty; admission, registration, and retention of students; evaluation of prior learning; and evaluation of student progress, including the awarding and recording of credit. The institution retains, even with contractual, dual enrollment, or other arrangements, responsibility for the design, content, and delivery of courses for which academic credit or degrees are awarded (4.32).

Assessment of learning is based on verifiable statements of what students are expected to gain, achieve, demonstrate, or know by the time they complete their academic program. The process of understanding what and how students are learning focuses on the course, competency, program, and institutional level. Assessment has the support of the institution's academic and institutional leadership and the systematic involvement of faculty and appropriate staff (8.3).

The Commission expressed appreciation for the report submitted by Bridgewater State University and the report of the evaluator who visited the institution's off-campus locations and hopes the evaluation process has contributed to institutional improvement. It appreciates your cooperation in the effort to provide public assurance of the quality of higher education in New England.

You are encouraged to share this letter with all of the institution's constituencies. It is Commission policy to inform the chairperson of the institution's governing board of action on its accreditation status. In a few days we will be sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Eugene Durgin, Jr. The institution is free to release information about the reports and the Commission's action to

Dr. Frederick W. Clark, Jr.
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others, in accordance with the enclosed policy on Public Disclosure of Information about Affiliated Institutions.

If you have any questions about the Commission's action, please contact Barbara Brittingham, President of the Commission.

Sincerely,

David P. Angel

Enclosure

cc: Mr. Eugene Durgin, Jr.
Evaluator